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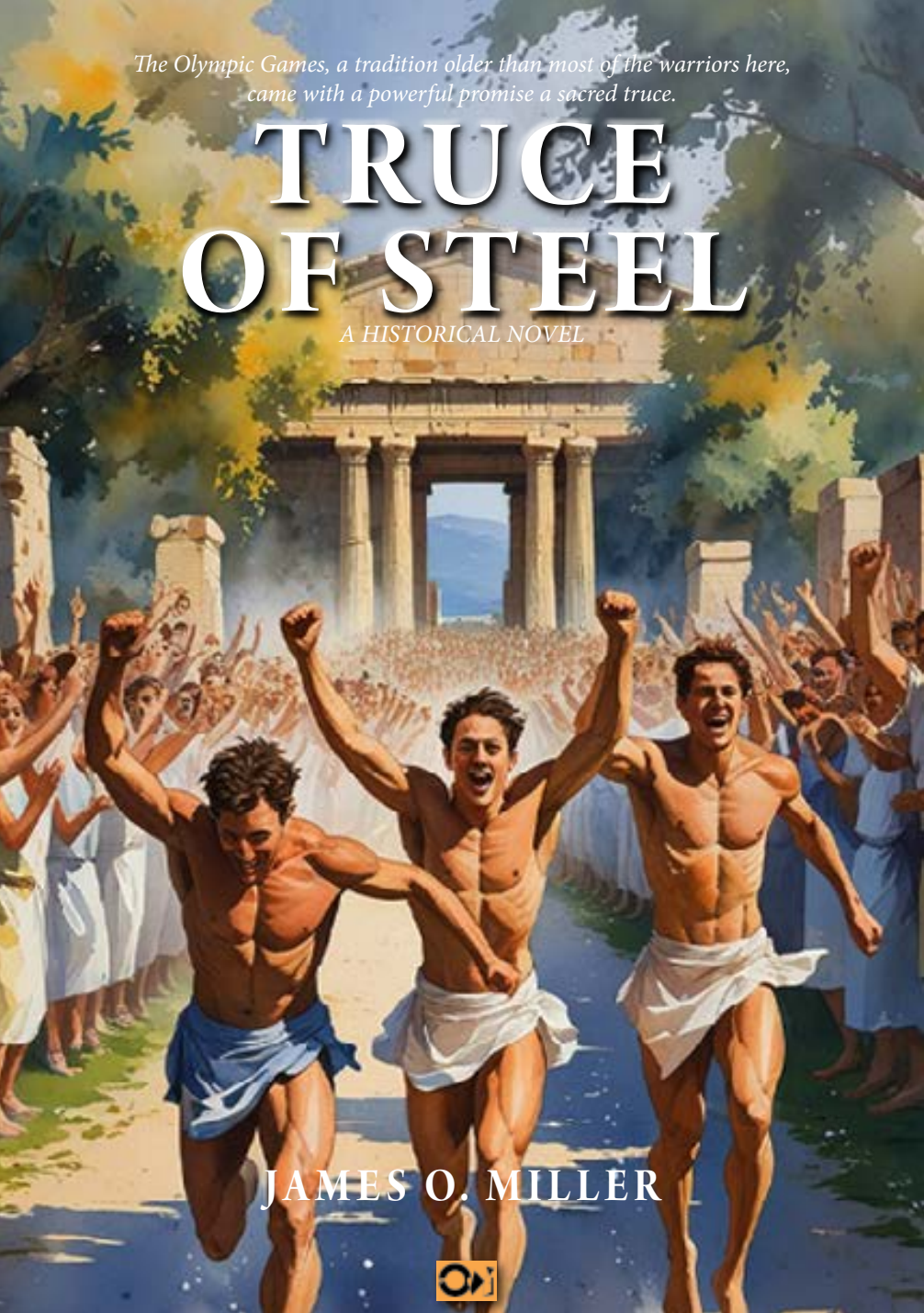
TRUCE OF STEEL

A HISTORICAL NOVEL



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Truce of Steel

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The sun, a fiery orange disc, sank slowly behind the jagged peaks of Mount Kronos. Shadows stretched long across the sacred plains, and the last rays of daylight clung to the hills as if reluctant to leave. Near the gates of the ancient stadium of Olympia, Nikomedes stood, his broad frame silhouetted against the golden light. The faint scent of wild olives filled the air, mingling with the distant sounds of laughter and the clinking of bronze armour. It was the calm before the storm, a serenity that stood in stark contrast to the storm brewing within his chest.

His armour, battered and worn from years of battle, gleamed dully in the fading light. It was a sight out of place, a relic of wars long past amidst the peace of this hallowed ground. The quiet beauty of Olympia, with its tall columns and lush groves, should have filled him with a sense of awe, but it did not. His gaze, narrowed and watchful, seemed to take in ev-

ery movement with the precision of a hawk. The distant cheer of young athletes preparing for the opening ceremony did little to quell the unease gnawing at him.

Nikomedes had bled for Athens, stood beside her soldiers in the mud of battlefields, and witnessed horrors that would make the gods themselves shudder. Now, he stood here as a shadow of his former self, tasked with guarding the Athenian athletes during the Olympic Games. The very thought of it irritated him. He, a man forged in the heat of war, reduced to standing idle while the city-states came together under the guise of peace.

The Olympic Games, a tradition older than most of the warriors here, came with a powerful promise a sacred truce, a ban on warfare for the duration of the competition. But Nikomedes had seen too much to believe in such fragile things. Peace, he knew, was not a gift handed down by the gods, but a tenuous line drawn in the sand. The Athenian soldiers, like him, had never trusted the Spartans to honour such a pact.

A rustle in the bushes nearby snapped him from his thoughts. His hand moved instinctively to the hilt of his sword, fingers brushing the worn leather of the

grip. His eyes swept over the olive grove, scanning for movement. The truce may have kept the warriors at bay, but old habits died hard. It only took a moment before his sharp senses recognized the figure stepping from the shadows Lycon, a young athlete from Athens, eager and full of youthful optimism.

"Nikomedes!" Lycon called out, his voice warm but tinged with impatience. His sandals scuffed the gravel beneath his feet as he jogged toward the older man. "The opening ceremony's starting. You're coming, aren't you?"

Nikomedes turned slowly, meeting Lycon's wide grin with a weary gaze. His fingers loosened from the hilt of his sword, but the tension still coiled in his gut. "Are you ready for this charade, old man?" Lycon asked with a cocky smile, an expression far too carefree for someone in his position.

Nikomedes didn't answer right away. The boy was too young to understand the weight of the situation. His eyes drifted toward the distant stadium, where the Athenian athletes were beginning to gather. Their faces were painted with symbols of victory, their bodies lean and honed for the competition ahead. They were here to compete under the banner of peace, to uphold the sacred truce.

But Nikomedes had fought too many wars to take any of this lightly. “It’s not the games that worry me, Lycon,” he said, his voice rough with the weight of experience. “It’s what we might find outside them.”

Lycon’s grin faltered, and he tilted his head in confusion. “What do you mean?”

Nikomedes felt the bitter sting of memories long buried rise to the surface. He had seen too many Spartans in his lifetime, both on the battlefield and off. The years of war had taught him a single truth: the Spartans were nothing if not dangerous. The truce that bound them all together was a mere formality. Once a warrior, always a warrior.

“The Spartans, boy,” Nikomedes said, his gaze drifting to the hills, where a small cluster of Spartan soldiers could be seen making their way toward the games. “The truce doesn’t make us friends. I’ve fought alongside them, and I’ve fought against them. They’ll honour the truce… until it serves them not to.”

Lycon frowned, clearly not understanding the full scope of what Nikomedes was saying. “It’s the games, old man. No one would break the truce here. This is sacred ground.”

Nikomedes snorted, the sound low and bitter. He turned back to the young man, his eyes narrowing as he took a step closer. “You think the Spartans care about sacred ground?” He glanced toward the distant hills once again, where figures draped in the red cloaks of Sparta moved in tight formation. “You haven’t seen the Spartans at their best, Lycon. They will break this truce without hesitation if they think it benefits them. I’ve seen it before. We’ve all seen it.”

Lycon’s youthful optimism bubbled to the surface again, and he let out a nervous laugh. “You’re a soldier, Nikomedes. But these are just athletes. Just men competing for honour. How could they break the truce here?”

Nikomedes fixed Lycon with a hard stare, and the young man’s laughter died in his throat. “You’re wrong, boy. Athletes or not, these men are warriors at heart. And warriors never truly lay down their weapons. Not when their pride’s on the line.”

The sharp clang of a bell echoed across the grounds, signalling the beginning of the opening ceremony. Nikomedes took a long, slow breath, his gaze once again shifting to the grand marble stadium. The gathering was meant to be a celebration of peace, a reminder that even in the heat of war, there was al-

ways a chance for unity. But to Nikomedes, it felt like a fragile house of cards, one slight breeze away from collapse.

The wind stirred through the trees, and Nikomedes caught a glimpse of a figure just beyond the crowd, tall, broad-shouldered, and unmistakably Spartan. His heart skipped a beat, and for a moment, everything seemed to slow down. The man's face was partially obscured by the crowd, but Nikomedes recognized him instantly. Leandros.

It was him Leandros, the Spartan warrior he had once fought beside in the brutal chaos of the Peloponnesian War. A cold shiver ran down Nikomedes' spine. The last time they had met, they had been on opposite sides of a battle. Blood had flowed freely, and it was a war neither side had won.

Nikomedes' hand instinctively twitched toward his sword.

"Nikomedes?" Lycon's voice broke through his thoughts, sounding a little alarmed now. "What's wrong?"

Nikomedes snapped back to reality. He clenched his jaw, masking the flicker of unease in his eyes.

"Nothing," he muttered, though his voice was tight. "Just old ghosts."

Lycon followed Nikomedes' gaze, his brow furrowing as he saw the Spartan figure. "Do you know him?"

Nikomedes' eyes never left Leandros. "I fought beside him... and against him. He's a man you should never trust."

Lycon's expression softened with disbelief. "But that was years ago. It's over. This is the truce. We have to trust it."

Nikomedes grunted in response. "You'll learn, Lycon. Trust and war don't mix."

Before he could say more, the ceremony began in earnest. The athletes marched onto the field, their chests puffed out with pride. Lycon rushed ahead, eager to join his fellow Athenian competitors, but Nikomedes stayed behind for a moment, his eyes locked on the Spartan.

Leandros, for his part, was looking directly at Nikomedes now, his face unreadable. But for a brief second, there was a flicker of recognition between them—a shared understanding that, in this place of peace, neither could truly trust the other.

Nikomedes knew one thing for certain. The truce might hold... for now. But peace was a thin veil. And warriors, especially Spartans, would always find a way to tear it apart.

With a final glance at the distant Spartan, Nikomedes turned and walked toward the field, his mind already racing with the uncertainty of what lay ahead.

The games had begun, but the real test was yet to come.

I.

The opening ceremony of the Olympic Games was a sight to behold. The sacred stadium of Olympia stretched before Nikomedes, the grand stone structure gleaming under the midday sun, the pillars standing like silent sentinels to the gods above. All around him, the sounds of trumpets filled the air, and the roar of thousands of spectators reached a deafening crescendo. The smell of dust and olive oil mixed in the warm breeze, and the Olympic flame flickered on its high altar.

But as the athletes gathered, muscles rippling and bodies adorned in intricate symbols of victory, Nikomedes felt the weight of something else pressing down on him, a tension, palpable and thick, that hung in the air like the calm before a storm.

His duties as the Athenian guardian were clear. He was here to ensure the safety of his athletes, to keep them from harm during these sacred games. But it wasn't the games that troubled him. It was the truce.

The sacred Olympic truce, established by Zeus himself, was meant to hold all warriors at bay. No weapons, no battles, no bloodshed. For this brief span of time, all hostilities were to cease. Yet, for someone like Nikomedes, who had lived through the bloodiest years of the Peloponnesian War, the idea of peace felt almost absurd.

He scanned the crowd, his eyes sharp, searching for any sign of trouble. As he stood there, the hum of the gathered crowds faded into the background, and his senses focused entirely on the arena. The bright colours of the athletes' uniforms flashed in his vision, but his gaze was fixed on something or rather, someone, just ahead.

There, at the far edge of the gathering, amidst a group of Spartan soldiers, stood a man who caught Nikomedes' attention. His posture, still and commanding, was unmistakable. The way the Spartan moved, with the air of someone who had seen countless battlefields and lived to tell the tale, stirred a mix of recognition and wariness in Nikomedes.

Leandros.

Nikomedes' heart skipped a beat. The Spartan was taller than most, his frame broad and imposing. His face, square-jawed and weathered by years of conflict, held a calm expression that betrayed nothing of what might be going on inside. His hair, once dark as midnight, had begun to silver at the temples, but his eyes, the same cold, calculating eyes Nikomedes remembered, hadn't changed at all.

Their gazes locked across the throng of athletes and spectators, and for a brief, fleeting moment, the noise around them disappeared. It was a moment suspended in time, the weight of years of war, of shared battles, pressing down on both men.

Nikomedes' hand instinctively went to the hilt of his sword, though he had no intention of drawing it. A reflex, born of years of survival.

"Nikomedes," Leandros spoke first, his voice low, carrying across the distance between them. His tone was calm, but there was something in the way he said it, an unspoken history, a bond that neither man could ever truly escape. "It's been years."

Nikomedes gave a tight, controlled nod. His throat

felt dry, but he kept his composure. “Leandros,” he responded, the word carrying a weight far beyond its simplicity.

The Spartan studied him for a moment, his eyes narrowing slightly, as if measuring the man before him. There was no anger in his gaze, no hatred. Just the quiet understanding between two men who had seen too much bloodshed together and against one another.

“You still fight for Athens?” Leandros asked, a hint of something like amusement creeping into his voice.

Nikomedes stiffened, his lips thinning into a hard line. “For my city, always,” he said, his voice low and firm. It was the truth, but there was more to it than that there always was. He had seen the destruction Athens had endured, had fought for her with every last ounce of strength. But now, after the war, now… things were different.

Leandros tilted his head, his eyes scanning the arena before returning to Nikomedes. “You believe this truce will hold?” There was a curious note in his voice, as though the question was more about understanding than anything else.

Nikomedes could feel the tension rising in his chest, the familiar stirring of distrust. The Spartan's words were weighted, not with doubt, but with something deeper. Something older.

"I have no choice but to obey it," Nikomedes replied, his tone hardening. "We all do. Whether we like it or not."

Leandros gave him a brief, almost imperceptible smile, one that did not reach his eyes. "Perhaps we will see each other again... after the games." His words hung in the air, a challenge wrapped in a veil of politeness.

Before Nikomedes could respond, a herald's voice rang out, summoning the athletes to the opening event. It was time for the games to begin. The moment was gone, lost amidst the ceremonial chaos as the athletes from every city-state shuffled forward, preparing to enter the arena.

Nikomedes watched Leandros move with the Spartan warriors, their disciplined, synchronized steps betraying their training. Despite the outward calm, Nikomedes could feel the undercurrent of violence that still ran beneath the surface. The truce was fragile—he knew that, and Leandros knew it, too.

The other athletes moved past, but Nikomedes remained rooted in place, his gaze still locked on the Spartan. He couldn't shake the feeling that something was about to unfold, something that would test the very limits of the truce they were supposed to uphold.

"Nikomedes?" Lycon's voice broke through his thoughts, pulling him back to the present. The young Athenian athlete, his face flushed with excitement, had approached him. He was eager, restless. "Are you coming? The events are about to start."

Nikomedes gave him a quick glance, forcing a tight smile. "Yes, Lycon," he replied, his voice barely above a whisper. "I'm coming."

As he followed the eager athlete toward the center of the arena, his mind remained on Leandros and the words left unsaid. The games had begun, but for Nikomedes, the real contest had yet to start.

The stadium erupted into a roar of excitement as the first event began, a race. The athletes dashed forward, their feet pounding the earth in a blur of motion. But Nikomedes' attention was elsewhere. The truce. The uneasy peace. The Spartan. It was all too fragile, too easily broken.

And Nikomedes couldn't shake the feeling that the spark was already there. Just waiting for the right moment to ignite.

* * * * *

Hours later, the festivities of the opening ceremony had faded into the night. Torches flickered around the sacred grounds of Olympia, casting long shadows over the ruins of the ancient city. The athletes, drunk on the atmosphere of the games, began to filter back to their tents, their laughter echoing in the night air.

Nikomedes, however, could not relax. He stood at the edge of the arena, his sharp eyes scanning the crowd. The tension in his chest had not abated; if anything, it had grown. There was something wrong here. Something hidden beneath the surface.

A figure appeared in the distance, emerging from the shadows. It was Leandros again. Alone. The Spartan warrior moved with deliberate steps, his eyes scanning the grounds as if searching for something.

Nikomedes' hand instinctively went to his sword, but he didn't draw it. Instead, he waited, watching as Leandros approached.

The Spartan stopped a few paces away, and their

eyes met again. This time, there was no pretence, no formalities. Just two men, each carrying the weight of years spent in conflict.

"You were right, Nikomedes," Leandros said quietly, his voice barely audible over the rustle of the wind. "This truce… it's a lie."

Nikomedes' heart raced, and for the first time since his arrival, he felt a surge of true fear. Not for himself, but for what was coming.

"We need to talk," Leandros continued. "There's something happening, something none of us were prepared for. I can feel it in the air. And it's coming... fast."

Nikomedes nodded, his eyes narrowing. "Then let's talk," he said, his voice cold and steady. "Before it's too late."

As the Spartan moved closer, Nikomedes could feel the storm approaching, no longer just a feeling, but a certainty. The games had begun, but the real battle, it seemed, was about to unfold. And it would be a battle fought not just in the arena, but in the very heart of the truce itself.

II.

The chariot race was one of the most anticipated events of the Olympic Games, a spectacle of speed and power, drawing the eyes of thousands. Nikomedes stood on the sidelines, his gaze fixed on the arena, but his mind was elsewhere. The sun blazed overhead, casting long shadows across the sand, as the crowd roared in excitement. The chariots, each drawn by four powerful horses, kicked up a cloud of dust as they thundered around the track.

Nikomedes' focus wasn't on the race itself, but on the men in it. Athletes. Warriors. The truce was fragile, and he could feel its strain in the air, like the first signs of a storm. He had seen this before, the tension between warriors who knew no peace, forced to pretend for a fleeting moment. But this moment wasn't just for show; it was a test of character, of resolve.

Lycon, the young Athenian athlete, was in the race. A promising charioteer, eager to prove himself, his youthful confidence written on his face as he manoeuvred his horses skilfully around the bend. Nikomedes couldn't help but admire the boy's spirit, but a part of him wondered if that confidence would be his undoing. The games were a test, yes, but not just of strength or skill. They were a test of restraint, of what a warrior could endure before the urge to fight overtook him.

As the chariots neared the final stretch, Nikomedes' instincts kicked in, a sixth sense honed over years of war. He watched the racers with sharpened eyes, sensing something wasn't right. Then, in an instant, the world exploded.

A loud crack echoed across the arena. One of the Spartan chariots had veered off course, its wheels locked in a collision with Lycon's. The horses screamed in panic, their bodies twisted in the chaos. Dust and sand erupted into the air as both chariots went down in a violent crash, the metal and wood splintering, the horses throwing their bodies against the earth in a frenzy.

The crowd gasped, and Nikomedes was already moving, pushing past the stunned spectators as his

muscles tensed, ready to act. His years of experience in battle made every second feel like an eternity, and his mind raced through the steps it would take to save the injured.

He reached the wreckage in a matter of moments, his hand outstretched toward Lycon, who lay motionless on the ground. Blood pooled beneath his head, his chest rising and falling shallowly, a sign that he was still alive but barely conscious. Nikomedes didn't hesitate, pulling the young man out of the wreckage with quick, practiced motions.

"Help him!" someone shouted from the crowd, but Nikomedes was already on it, his mind calculating the quickest way to stabilize the Athenian. He needed to move him, get him away from the wreckage before it caught fire or crushed him further. But as he turned to lift Lycon, a voice cut through the chaos.

"You should let him die."

Nikomedes froze, his blood running cold. The voice was unmistakable.

Leandros.

The Spartan warrior stood behind him, arms crossed, his expression as hard as stone. His eyes,

cold and calculating, bore into Nikomedes, and for a moment, the two men locked eyes in a tense silence.

"What did you say?" Nikomedes' voice was low, a growl of barely contained rage.

Leandros didn't flinch. "The truce doesn't mean I'll help your men. It means I'll only watch you fight your own." His voice was steady, almost clinical, as if speaking of something far removed from the present, something that had already been decided long before the chariot race.

Nikomedes' grip on his sword tightened, the instinct to draw it rising within him. His knuckles whitened, but he kept his weapon sheathed. There was too much at stake here. Too much to lose.

"This is not war," Nikomedes spat, his voice sharp. "This is a test of honour. Something you Spartans might not understand."

Leandros raised an eyebrow, his lips curling into a faint, mocking smile. "And yet, here we are, standing side by side, aren't we? It's not peace that keeps us apart, Nikomedes. It's the rules. And these rules…" He glanced around, his eyes flicking over the spectators, the athletes, the priests standing by the altar

of Zeus. "…they mean nothing in the end. You and I both know that."

The words hung in the air between them, thick with meaning. Nikomedes felt a rush of anger rise in him, a surge of old instincts the same ones that had served him so well in the heat of battle. But he held them back. Just for a moment. Just long enough to keep the truce intact.

He looked down at Lycon, his breath shallow, barely stirring. The boy was fading. Nikomedes' instincts screamed at him to save him, to do whatever it took but there was something else nagging at him. The truce. The fragile peace that held these men together. Could he afford to break it now?

"You're right," Nikomedes said quietly, his voice almost a whisper. The words tasted bitter, but he forced them out. "But it's not over yet."

Leandros stepped closer, his expression unreadable, his gaze flicking to the Spartan charioteer who lay pinned beneath his overturned chariot. The man groaned in pain, his body crushed beneath the wreckage. Nikomedes couldn't help but notice the Spartan's indifferent glance toward him.

"Do you intend to save him too?" Leandros asked, his voice dripping with disdain. "Your men, your rules, your honour. How long can you play at peace before you're forced to choose?"

Nikomedes swallowed hard, the weight of the decision pressing down on him. He could feel the eyes of the crowd on him, the tension thickening with every passing second. It was like standing on the edge of a cliff, with nothing but the abyss below.

"I will not abandon my men," Nikomedes said, his voice firm, despite the maelstrom inside him. "Not even to make a point for your Spartans."

Leandros' lips twisted into a thin smile, and he gave a short, sharp nod. "So be it. But don't expect me to lift a finger to help you. The truce is your battle, not mine."

With that, Leandros turned on his heel and walked away, his heavy footsteps leaving an echo in Nikomedes' chest. The tension between them was palpable, but it was far from over. The truce would hold for now. But the lines between ally and enemy were beginning to blur, and Nikomedes knew that soon, it would all come to a head.

Nikomedes' eyes lingered on the Spartan warrior for a moment longer, then he turned back to Lycon, still unconscious and bleeding. The Athenian charioteer groaned softly, and Nikomedes did his best to stabilize him, ignoring the weight of Leandros' words echoing in his mind.

The truce was no simple thing. It wasn't just about keeping the peace—it was about survival. And right now, Nikomedes wasn't sure which battle he would face first: the one that required his sword or the one that required his soul.

But one thing was certain, the test of peace had already begun.

III.

The morning sun had barely risen over Olympia when Nikomedes, already awake, heard the murmurs of voices rising around him. The camp was alive with the energy of the Games, the athletes preparing for the events to come, but there was something different in the air today. Tension. Unease. Whispers that carried with them an unmistakable sense of betrayal.

Nikomedes had lived through countless wars, but this? This was different. The truce, fragile as it was, had never felt more tenuous. He could feel it in his bones, something was amiss.

It started with the Athenian athletes. He overheard a conversation between two of them, their words hushed but filled with anger.

"—training equipment," one of them muttered, his voice tight with frustration. "It's gone. Stolen."

"Impossible," the other replied, disbelief lacing his tone. "Everything was locked up tight last night. Who could have—"

"A Spartan," the first man hissed, eyes darting around nervously. "I saw him leave the camp after dark. He had something in his hand."

The second athlete's eyes widened. "A Spartan? Are you sure?"

"I swear by Zeus. There's no other explanation. Someone from their camp took it."

Nikomedes' heart sank. This was no accident, no small misstep. This was betrayal, and it couldn't be ignored. He knew the stakes of the truce, they were meant to be honoured by both sides, no matter the personal hatred or history between them. But to steal from each other? That was crossing a line. A line that, once crossed, might not be so easy to uncross.

He moved quickly, pushing through the crowded training grounds, his mind racing. The Athenian athletes were already on edge. If word of this got out, the truce might shatter before the day's events even began.

Nikomedes' instincts, honed in the chaos of war,

had always served him well. He knew exactly where to go.

The Spartan camp was not far from the Athenian tents. As he neared it, he saw the figures of the warriors moving about, repairing their equipment, sharpening their weapons. Among them was Leandros, the Spartan warrior Nikomedes had once fought beside, and against. Calm, calculating, always the same. But today, Nikomedes could see something in his eyes, something was different. A flicker of tension that had not been there before.

Nikomedes approached him, his footsteps firm on the gravel beneath his sandals.

"Leandros," he called, his voice low but carrying across the camp. The Spartan turned, his face unreadable.

"Nikomedes," Leandros replied, his tone neutral. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

Nikomedes didn't waste time with pleasantries. "I've come to ask if this truce means anything to you," he growled, his voice edged with suspicion. "Something has been taken from our camp. Valuable training equipment. And the thief? A Spartan."

Leandros' eyes narrowed, his expression not betraying any hint of guilt, but something about his posture, tense, but controlled, gave Nikomedes pause. The Spartan's face was as impassive as a stone, but his words were cold, measured.

"Do you accuse me?" Leandros asked, his gaze piercing. "I would not risk my honour for a trinket, Nikomedes. I am no thief."

Nikomedes stepped forward, his fists clenched at his sides, the muscles in his arms taut with the weight of old instincts screaming to act. "Then who?" he demanded, his voice low but dangerous. "Who else could it be?"

Leandros took a long, slow breath, and for a moment, his eyes flickered to the side, as though contemplating something far deeper than the current argument. His voice softened, and he glanced around, as if to ensure no one else was listening.

"It's not just the truce that keeps us from killing each other, old friend," Leandros said, his tone quieter now, almost weary. "It's the threat of something greater."

Nikomedes stiffened, the words sinking in, but his

confusion grew. “What threat?” he asked, his brow furrowing. “What could be greater than this truce? Than this fleeting peace we’ve agreed upon?”

Leandros’ lips twisted into a thin, grim smile, but there was no humour in it. “The threat of losing everything,” he replied, his eyes locking with Nikomedes’ in a gaze that was as cold and hard as the steel of a spear. “Even in peace, we can still be enemies.”

Nikomedes’ heart clenched at the words, the familiar weight of war pressing on his chest once more. “What do you mean?” he asked, his voice tight.

Leandros hesitated, his eyes briefly scanning the camp, then the distant hills beyond, as if the very landscape might hold the answer. Finally, he spoke again, his voice barely above a whisper, but laden with an unspoken truth.

“There are those among us who see the truce as a charade,” Leandros said quietly. “They believe the only true peace comes through victory, through dominance. They would rather see us fight and die than live with the shame of peace.”

Nikomedes felt a chill creep up his spine. “You’re telling me someone within your camp...”

"Someone within both camps," Leandros interrupted, his voice now hard and sharp. "There are those in Athens, just as there are in Sparta, who would rather see this truce broken. They're using this Games as a stage for something much darker. The theft it's just the beginning."

Nikomedes could feel the ground shift beneath him. The idea that the Games, which had been meant to bring peace, were now being used as a cover for something far more sinister, something that could unravel everything, was too much to grasp all at once.

"Who?" Nikomedes asked, his voice low, dangerous. "Who is behind this?"

Leandros' eyes flicked to a group of Spartans in the distance, who were still repairing their chariots. Then, he lowered his voice, speaking in a tone that carried the weight of years spent fighting alongside and against one another.

"I don't know yet," he said, his gaze intense. "But I will find out. And so will you, old friend. Because if the truce fails, if these Games fail, it will not be Athens or Sparta that wins. It will be the ones pulling the strings, hiding in the shadows."

Nikomedes felt a cold sweat break out on the back of his neck. The words hung between them, heavy with implication. He wanted to believe that the truce was strong enough to withstand any challenge. But Leandros' warning had struck a chord deep inside him.

"Then we stop it," Nikomedes said, his voice resolute. "We find whoever is behind this and stop them before they turn this Games into another battlefield."

Leandros nodded, his eyes dark with understanding. "It won't be easy. We'll have to work together, old friend. And that, in itself, might be the hardest part."

Nikomedes met his gaze, his expression hardening. "For the Games. For the truce. And for the peace we almost had."

Leandros gave a short, almost imperceptible nod, before turning back to his men. The weight of what they were about to face hung in the air like a storm cloud, heavy and inevitable. Nikomedes knew the Games were no longer just a test of strength or skill. They were a battle for something far greater—something far more dangerous. And in the shadows, betrayal awaited.

IV.

The sun hung low over the ancient city of Olympia, casting long shadows across the dusty arena. The Games had reached their apex, and the roar of the crowd filled the air, a deafening mix of excitement and tension. Today, the final event would decide more than just the victor, it would determine whether the fragile truce between Athens and Sparta could endure.

Nikomedes stood at the edge of the arena, eyes scanning the bleachers where Athenians and Spartans alike watched with bated breath. His body ached from the trials of the past days, the weight of his age pressing down on him, but his resolve was as strong as ever. He had lived through more battles than he could count, but today was different. Today, it wasn't just his own life on the line, it was the truce, the peace, the very idea of cooperation between their two warring cities.

He turned to the gate, where Leandros, the Spartan warrior he had once called both comrade and enemy, appeared. The crowd's roar intensified as the two men made eye contact across the arena. Leandros was a tower of muscle and discipline, his expression stoic as always, but Nikomedes could see the tension in his eyes, the same uncertainty that gnawed at him.

The final event, the pankration, was a brutal contest, a mix of boxing and wrestling where there were no rules, no time limits, and no mercy. The crowd loved it because it was pure, unrelenting violence. But today, for Nikomedes, it was more than that. It was a test of everything he had come to believe in. The Games had been a symbol of peace, but now, they had become a battleground once again.

He stepped into the ring, his feet sinking into the soft earth, the distant chants of the spectators ringing in his ears. The scent of dust, sweat, and blood filled the air as he faced Leandros. The two warriors circled each other, the silence between them deafening, a tension that was almost tangible.

"I never thought I'd face you like this," Nikomedes muttered, his voice low, yet carrying across the arena.

Leandros' lips twitched into a slight smile, though

there was no humour in it. “Neither did I. But war is a game we all play.”

The words hung in the air, heavy with the weight of their shared history. They had fought together in the past, their blades cutting through the chaos of battle. But now, in the heart of Olympia, under the watchful eyes of gods and men alike, they were enemies once more.

The horn sounded, and the fight began.

Nikomedes lunged first, his fist aimed at Leandros’ jaw. The Spartan moved with fluid precision, sidestepping the strike and countering with a powerful punch to Nikomedes’ ribs. The sound of impact echoed through the arena. Nikomedes grunted in pain, but he did not falter. He spun, catching Leandros by the arm and twisting it behind his back, forcing him to the ground.

The crowd gasped as the two men struggled, their bodies locked in a brutal contest of strength and skill. Nikomedes could feel his aging body protesting, the weight of years catching up to him, but his will to win, the will to protect the truce, drove him forward.

Leandros, however, was relentless. He twisted be-

neath Nikomedes, his legs finding purchase on the ground, and with a brutal shove, he flipped them both over. Nikomedes hit the ground hard, the air forced from his lungs. For a moment, he lay there, gasping for breath, his vision blurry. But he was a warrior, and he knew how to fight through pain.

Leandros stood over him, a look of determination in his eyes. "This is where we end it, Nikomedes," he said, his voice cold but not without a trace of something else something that almost sounded like regret.

Nikomedes' eyes flicked to the crowd, to the Athenians and Spartans who were watching in silence. The stakes had never been higher. He had to end this fight, but how? If he defeated Leandros, it might break the truce. If he lost, it would be a humiliating blow to Athens, to the peace they had worked so hard to preserve. But he couldn't stop now. Not when everything was at risk.

With a mighty roar, he surged forward, knocking Leandros off balance. The two men collided, their bodies slamming into the earth with a force that rattled the ground beneath them. Nikomedes drove his fist into Leandros' side, the blow landing with a sickening thud. Leandros gasped, but then his fist found

Nikomedes' throat, squeezing with an unyielding grip.

The world began to spin. Nikomedes struggled to breathe, his vision fading, but he would not give up. Not now.

"Leandros…" he gasped, his voice barely a whisper. "The truce… we fight… for more than this…"

Leandros hesitated. His grip loosened just slightly. For a moment, their gazes locked, both men seeing something in the other, the shared history, the respect, the bond forged in the fires of war. And then, as if in that instant, both of them understood.

The truce was not just about winning or losing. It was about something far deeper, the survival of peace, the survival of all they had fought for.

Leandros released his hold, his hand dropping to the ground beside Nikomedes. "We fight… for peace," he muttered, his voice hoarse.

Nikomedes, gasping for air, nodded. With one final surge of energy, he pushed Leandros off, rolling to his feet and catching his breath. The two warriors stood facing each other, the fight momentarily forgotten as they shared a fleeting moment of understanding.

But the crowd had not forgotten. The roar that erupted from the stands was deafening, a wave of sound that shook the very earth beneath their feet. They had seen what they wanted, a fight to the death but what they were seeing now was something even rarer: the moment of realization that even warriors could be brothers in arms, that there was something worth fighting for beyond mere victory.

Nikomedes extended his hand toward Leandros, his eyes meeting the Spartan's with an intensity that spoke volumes. "Perhaps we are not so different after all."

Leandros looked at the outstretched hand for a long moment. His brow furrowed, uncertainty flickering in his eyes. Then, with a slow, deliberate motion, he extended his own hand, shaking Nikomedes' firmly.

"For now," Leandros said, his voice carrying a faint trace of a smile, "we are allies."

The tension in the air shifted, and the crowd, sensing the shift, fell silent. The truce was no longer a fragile concept, it was real, forged in the arena between two warriors who had faced each other on the battlefield and found common ground.

As they stood together, side by side, Nikomedes looked out over the arena, his gaze drifting to the horizon. The battle had ended, but the real test, the survival of peace, had only just begun.

The truce had held. For now.

But only time would tell if it would survive.

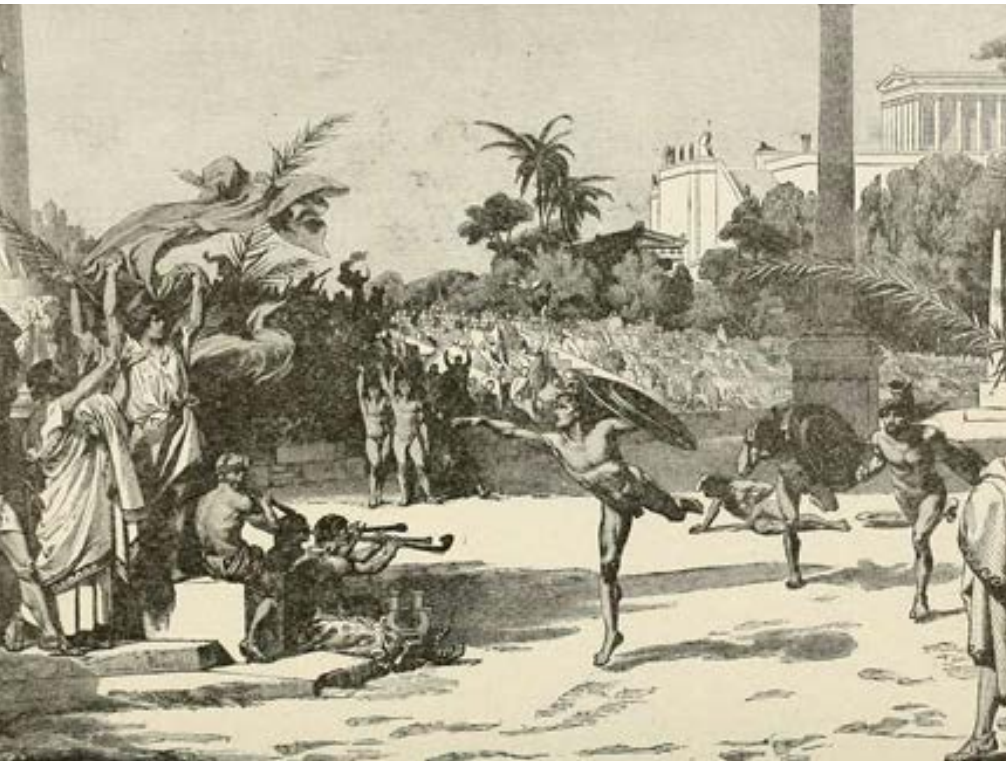
END

Truce of Steel

James O. Miller

Ovi eBook Publishing 2025

Ovi eBook Publishing
Design: Thanos



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The Olympic Games, a tradition older than most of the warriors here, came with a powerful promise a sacred truce.

TRUCE OF STEEL

A HISTORICAL NOVEL

James O. Miller. After 23 years of high school teaching history and four years teaching in Germany retirement didn't come well especially since I hate gardening and golf. So I decided to exercise my imagination combined with my academic knowledge.

JAMES O. MILLER